New Worlds of Errors and Expectations: Basic Writers and Digital Assumptions

Marisa A. Klages and J. Elizabeth Clark

ABSTRACT: This article examines the challenges of teaching basic writing today as students come to the classroom with the basic fluency of digital natives but have the same need for learning writing and critical thinking skills that has traditionally marked basic writers. While most basic writers are adept at accessing information digitally, they are not as proficient when it comes to producing digital information, nor are they able to code switch between informal cyber-situations and the expectations of academic and professional cyber-literacy. They also need to deepen their understanding of the role writing can play in developing digital texts. This article addresses how ePortfolios, blogs, and Web 2.0 tools included in basic writing classes at LaGuardia Community College help students to become effective users of digital media and learn how to write for a multimodal environment.

KEYWORDS: ePortfolio; digital literacy; basic writing; teaching with technology; multimodal composition; student reflection

In an age when 8 million American adults have blogs (Rainie), e-mail is ubiquitous, cyber-communities like YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and MySpace are already passé among the teen and college-age set, and the use of computers in composition is a given, technology is part of the academic zeitgeist. While in the 1980s and 1990s, much was made of "the digital divide," documenting the economic and educational injustice of access to computers, those arguments are largely erased, or forgotten, in a culture where computers are everywhere. With the advent of Web 2.0 and social media, however, a new digital divide is emerging. Concomitant with the idea of the "digital native" is the idea that all students will come to the

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© *Journal of Basic Writing*, Vol. 28, No. 1, 2009

classroom proficient in new technologies, cyber-literate, and comfortable with the discourse of digital rhetoric. But this expectation presumes of its "digital natives" a literacy which they have absorbed uncritically or which they cannot produce (Prensky 1).

While many basic writers come to us today with the fluency of digital natives, they still have the same need for learning writing and critical thinking skills that has traditionally marked basic writers. Moreover, while most basic writers are adept at accessing information digitally, they are not as proficient when it comes to producing digital information, nor are they able to code-switch between informal cyber-situations and the more formal academic and professional expectations of cyber-literacy. They also need to deepen their understanding of the role writing can play in developing digital texts. In order to be effective users of digital media, students must know how to write for a multimodal environment; they are adrift in a world of instant publishing without the skills of proficient writers and thinkers. Where in previous eras, one might argue that basic writers were almost invisible, today basic writers are often audaciously demonstrating their lack of understanding of edited American English online. Furthermore, the digital environment encourages this showcasing of ungrammatical writing with the widespread use of texting, emoticons, and popular websites like "I Can Has Cheezburger." While these modalities are appropriate for digital environments promoting social networking, they confront basic writers, and in fact all students, with one more code from which they need to switch when intersecting with academic and professional realms of writing.

The virtual world is process-less: writing becomes an act of moving from immediate composing to instant publishing. What, then, are the ramifications for basic writers? How do we teach process in a process-less world of digital media? How do we engage students and help them to value process as a necessary tool for becoming more articulate in their writing? How can we engage students so that they can navigate both digital and traditional writing? How do we help students to code switch between their use of technology with friends and its use in academic and professional situations?

As teachers at a large, urban community college where pen and paper are often the only classroom technology, we believe that ePortfolios are an ideal pedagogical tool for engaging basic writers and teaching them to merge Web 2.0 digital literacies and multimodal composing strategies at this critical juncture of digital and traditional writing. In its most basic iteration, the ePortfolio is a digital version of the traditional paper portfolio, in which students collect written work during the term, select key pieces, and write

reflections about those pieces. In contrast with paper portfolios, however, ePortfolios are available online to employers, admissions officers, and the international friends and families of students. While the ePortfolio adds portability and the possibility of using multimodal composing, it also builds on a considerable legacy of portfolio pedagogy and teaching with technology in the field of composition studies. More importantly, the ePortfolio is beginning to radically change our students' understandings of their relationship to the written word in an era of digital literacy and the power of authority hidden within that authorship. Through the use of ePortfolio and other Web 2.0 tools, students implement critical digital literacy skills as they learn how to write for real audiences and find an authentic voice.

Recontextualizing the Digital Native: Writing and ePortfolios

Clocks change themselves on the weekend of daylight savings time. Coffee makers can be set to turn on automatically in the morning. We bank online. We know what our friends and family members are doing throughout the day by following their Twitter and Facebook updates. And yet, our classrooms remain largely the same as they were twenty or thirty years ago. We have not radically changed our practices or our academic expectations of students. In *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives* (published in 2008), John Palfrey and Urs Gasser outline recent shifts in culture and explain how the youngest generations of global citizens exist in a digital world that bears little similarity to the world their parents and teachers grew up in. In a conversation with students in a digital rhetoric course, DigiRhet.org created an impressive catalogue of the shifts in our daily lives caused by an increased reliance on technology and the ways that students understand the world. Almost every aspect of our lives today is permeated by a reliance on seemingly invisible technology:

> The list we generated was extensive, ranging from a digital alarm clock; an interactive mapping and direction-giving device one student had in her car; a device for runners to clip onto their shoes that digitally records their progress at time markers set for a marathon; a digital meat thermometer with an alarm that ran through a student's oven; a "virtual girlfriend" a student was "dating" that sent text messages via cell phone and e-mail; a digital audio recorder that allowed a student to record notes and thoughts as she commuted to campus, which she could then connect to her computer to

> transcribe her voice to text notes with the software that came with the recorder; a networked PlayStation console with a headset so that geographically distant players could not only compete against one another online but also speak to each other while gaming; a grocery store keychain card, which promised access to savings and specials but which students recognized quite quickly as a tracking device to monitor purchases; a USB drive that worked as a portable miniature hard drive and virtually replaced all other media (e.g., floppy disks, CDs); and digital cable and TiVo, which several students had in their homes. The infiltration of these different technologies in students' lives varied greatly; for instance, when the student who brought in her USB drive to show and talk about separated it from her keychain and held it in the air, at least ten other students immediately grabbed their keychains or dug in their bags to show their own USB drives and talk about common practices, different uses, storage capacities, cost, and so on. (236-37)

Students are clearly acquiring new types of literacy in their engagement with technology. With the acquisition of new hardware and software, new technological gadgets and devices, and the invisible ways that technology has become embedded in everything from our ovens to our cell phones, the emerging digital world is a vastly different place, one of connectivity and fast pace, than the one in which many college professors were educated.

However, just because students have and use technology, this does not mean that they are proficient in creating it or in code switching for different audiences. As we transition to this new culture as citizens and as teachers, we are simultaneously challenged with learning new media ourselves and bringing them into the classroom, wrestling with what this cultural shift means for our classrooms and our pedagogy. What is real writing in our new technologically rich world? How have the roles of teachers and students been reversed by the fact that our students are often more techno-savvy than we are?

In her 2004 address to the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Kathleen Blake Yancey characterized this cultural change as "tectonic." Likening this increasing technological dependence, which represents a massive change in daily life, to the shifting of the plates that undergird the continents, Yancey believes, as do increasing numbers of educators, that our new digital culture calls for a significant shift in the classroom. Yancey argues, "Literacy today is in the midst of a tectonic change. Even

inside of school, never before have writing and composing generated such diversity in definition" ("Made Not Only in Words" 298). Yancey examines the impact of these different modes of writing and the situations in which that writing occurs: "The members of the writing public have learned—in this case, to write, to think together, to organize, and to act within these forums—largely without instruction and, more to the point here, largely without our instruction. They need neither self-assessment nor our assessment: they have a rhetorical situation, a purpose, a potentially worldwide audience, a choice of technology and medium—and they write" ("Made Not Only in Words" 301-302). No longer do writing instructors struggle to present the idea of audience to the students in their classrooms. Their students already write publicly on blogs, wikis, and social networking sites, and often, to a large audience of readers connected by cell phones, texting, and the Internet. However, embedded in Yancey's analysis is an assumption that there are culturally and academically valued forms of this new writing, which many basic writers have yet to master.

A 2008 Pew Internet and American Life Report, "Writing, Technology and Teens," highlights the distinction between public and private writing: "At the core, the digital age presents a paradox. Most teenagers spend a considerable amount of their life composing texts, but they do not think that a lot of the material they create electronically is ***real*** writing. The act of exchanging emails, instant messages, texts, and social network posts is communication that carries the same weight to teens as phone calls and between-class hallway greetings" (Lenhart et al.). While many students recognize the difference between academic and professional writing and virtual writing, they are not adept at code switching between the virtual world and the world of academia. In academic and professional discourse, there are assumptions about "acceptable modes of communication" for a particular context. This hidden world of literacy presumes that students and writers in general are able to make the necessary transitions between differing contexts. How, then, do faculty help students to use the technological medium they are conversant in to learn and engage with more traditional forms of writing? How do we transform the paper and pen classroom to a digitally saturated environment? And, most importantly, how do we adjust our own understanding of "good" writing from traditional print literacy to a definition that includes digital literacy—and in ways that are continually shifting? In our next section we discuss the use of ePortfolios at LaGuardia Community College as one way to help shift the classroom to include digital literacy.

Texting Isn't Writing: Today's Basic Writer

Located in Long Island City in Queens, LaGuardia Community College is one of six community colleges in the City University of New York (CUNY). It serves a student body of 15,169 matriculated students who come from 163 different countries and speak 118 different languages ("LaGuardia Community College Institutional Profile"). Our classrooms are a fabulous cacophony of difference, divergence, and often, dislocation. Students come to us with varying degrees of familiarity with the American educational system. Classes at LaGuardia include students from underperforming American high schools, students who were trained in Caribbean schools based on the British-colonial model, students who have come to the United States as refugees with very little educational preparation, and students with advanced degrees from their native countries. Because of their diverse educational histories, these students present a complicated mix of expectations about their interactions with teacher-authorities. And, like all students, they arrive in our classrooms informed by the ideologies that have guided their upbringing. LaGuardia students also face socioeconomic risk, often unable to afford the "affordable" community college tuition (tuition and fees for full-time students at LaGuardia range from $1,545.85 to $2,424.85 per semester depending on the student's residency status). Many students have family members to support and care for, and they often work full time while maintaining full-time student schedules. They are at risk on many levels, teetering on the edge of that ever-elusive American dream.

Nearly half of all students entering LaGuardia (44 percent in 2006) are placed in basic writing. Like most basic writers, they are uncomfortable with writing and experience high levels of writing anxiety in academic situations. They have little or no confidence in their writing, reading, and critical thinking abilities. For most of these students, academic writing is seen as a one-way communication in which they seek to demonstrate acquired knowledge to a teacher-authority. In an era of No Child Left Behind, students educated in American public schools often understand writing as high-stakes and test-driven. These students often have little investment in education as a means toward cultural and social empowerment, rather seeing it as an end to economic advancement.

In most situations, including their placement into a basic writing course in college, writing has served as a basis for punishment. Within the City University of New York system, students are placed in basic writing based on their score on a placement exam. Once in the basic writing sequence,

students at some CUNY colleges are prevented from beginning their college-level studies. Additionally, basic skills courses (including reading, math, and writing) no longer carry credit. Students perceive the basic writing course as an academic ghetto, preventing them from pursuing their educational goals. Exit from this course is based on a high-stakes examination. Thus, students regard academic writing as the means by which they are judged and found lacking.

Many LaGuardia students also face the challenge of negotiating writing in a second, third, or fourth language, which becomes a daunting obstacle. Despite success in English language acquisition courses preceding their work in basic writing or ESL courses, these students come to us as hesitant writers, concerned about their fluency and often frustrated by their inability to communicate as eloquently or persuasively as they might in their native languages.

Although basic writing and ESL students do not usually think of themselves as writers, they maintain a considerable online presence through texting, e-mail, and social networking. However, this online presence falls outside of their understanding of writing. Indeed, it exists outside of their discomfort with writing. Digitally, they exist happily in a mix of slang and imperatives and patois that richly captures their everyday lives.

Facebook, MySpace, and various journaling communities all privilege personal narrative as a powerful means to construct political, entrepreneurial, and entertainment personalities. Our students, however, have repeatedly learned that their stories are not important. Throughout their educational careers they have been given impersonal, prescriptive writing assignments that punish them for incorrect grammar. Their conception of academic writing is limited to the rigidly constructed five-paragraph essay, something that spelled success in high school writing assignments and on the SAT writing examination. So, while presidential candidates make much of the opportunity to connect with voters through personal stories that make them seem more "real" or "down to earth," and affluent teens and young adults keep blogs that offer their opinions on everything from fashion to sex to politics, our community college students are silenced in this larger cultural milieu, believing that their stories and their lives are unimportant. Their online presence is a means of everyday, survival communication that happens on the go, in short bursts as they connect with others in their community. They do not see this online communication as a connection to the larger world of "writing."

ePortfolios: "*What we ask students to do is who we ask them to be*"

At LaGuardia, the use of digital portfolios, or ePortfolios, offers the opportunity to merge the best of Web 2.0 and the tectonic shifts Yancey identifies with a process-based writing approach that teaches students to think about their writing and what is at stake when they publish that writing (for more information about LaGuardia's use of ePortfolios, go to http://www.eportfolio.lagcc.cuny.edu/). As students create and refine their ePortfolios, they work toward a new digital literacy while using their already well-defined technological skills, and in the process they begin to understand the expectations of a digital culture.

Too often, basic writers are asked to write simple essays that don't engage their intellectual interests or their critical thinking abilities. For some, "developmental skills" is a phrasal code for "not college able." And all too often, basic writers are marginalized within a larger college curriculum that uses the issue of "standards" as a weapon against them. Yancey writes, "*What we ask students to do is who we ask them to be*" ("Postmodernism" 738, emphasis in original). In our classrooms, we seek to use the ePortfolio as a tool to suggest to students that the world they write is the world they will claim, as authors and as citizens. In our basic writing classrooms, we strive to shift students' perspectives of themselves as non-writers as they compile ePortfolios documenting their development as writers and reflecting on the tangible progress as evidenced by their collected writing. This practice significantly challenges the other measures of student achievement in the course—two high-stakes exams imposed by the university system and our department—to help students document their emerging authorship and to claim authority over their own writing, and, ultimately, their own education. The ePortfolio, and students' understanding of their progress and their limitations as writers, serves to provide them with a powerful counter-narrative within an otherwise anonymous and punitive writing context. As they develop rich multimodal ePortfolios characterized by an intensive use of visual rhetoric to complement their written and oral productions in the course, students build on their technological dexterity and begin to understand their emerging writing skills as equally important components of their digital literacy.

The ePortfolio serves as a locus to teach developmental writing over the course of a semester while also using what Yancey calls a "web sensible portfolio," where students can explore their emerging literacy in a wide range

of digital media ("Postmodernism" 745). The heart of our ePortfolio pedagogy revolves around three key practices: (1) asking students to demonstrate revision in essays, (2) asking students to reflect on their development as writers, and (3) encouraging students to explore the full possibilities of the digital platform the ePortfolio provides. In basic writing courses, the first two often take priority because, as students work on their writing and their reflections, they are also often learning to use the ePortfolio system. Accordingly, their first ePortfolios are often less technologically sophisticated. However, since we share the mantra, "If you can do it on paper, why reproduce paper in the ePortfolio?" we find that students are increasingly creative in their use of digital media. They create movies, PowerPoints, and audio files that allow them to express themselves and to demonstrate their critical inquiry in courses as varied as writing, history, math, and science.

To this end, the practice of writing in an ePortfolio fully embodies what DigiRhet.org identifies as a culture where "Writing is no longer a purely text-driven practice," but one where

> [w]riting requires carefully and critically analyzing and selecting among multiple media elements. Digital writers rely on words, motion, interactivity, and visuals to make meaning. Available computer software applications, for instance, allow writers to more easily manipulate and embed visual information in their documents. Even basic word-processing applications come with fairly large clip-art collections and offer the ability for writers to create data displays like charts, graphs, and diagrams. Most Web search engines allow writers to search for photographs, animations, and video clips to download and use in documents, Web pages, and digital movies. These tools shift the ways in which composing takes place: they change the way we do research, the way we produce texts, the way we deliver our writing. (240)

Student ePortfolios become public artifacts in the course, accessible to all of their classmates as well as their instructors. Long before the evolution of the ePortfolio, our writing classes were all based on paper portfolio models. However, in many ways, the paper portfolio reinscribes the teacher-student relationship as students hand in a portfolio at the end of the term to a professor. The ePortfolio, among its many possibilities, makes writing more public than any other technique or tool we have tried in the classroom. Gone are

the days of peer review groups restricted by the number of copies a student makes of his/her paper (and complicated by broken copiers, printers needing toner, or students without money to pay for photocopies).

The ePortfolio allows easy access for all students enrolled in a course, or even among several courses, depending on the instructor's course design. The ePortfolio is also a good platform to allow students to showcase their use of other technologies like blogs, wikis, digital stories (mini-movies based on essays students write), PowerPoint presentations, and a public discussion thread (through Blackboard course management software). The ePortfolio serves as the locus for all of a student's digital production in our courses. And, because of the very public nature of all of these technologies, students come to think of all writing in our courses as public. Because anyone in the class, or sometimes in other classes, might comment on their work, they work harder to make their writing impressive. During the basic writing course, students begin to combine their increased proficiency in using technology with their own broadened expectations of traditional writing, producing a new investment in their own writing and literacy. That someone else might read their writing is no longer a possible abstraction; it's an expectation. Students also inspire and teach one another with their discoveries, their reflections, and their critical analyses of texts we read in class.

Throughout the semester, students increasingly complicate their understanding of authorship as they write the drafts and reflections that appear on the ePortfolio. Coupled with this new public writing, students begin to enter into an academic conversation about intellectual property and the value of ideas. They engage with new forms of rhetoric as they combine digital imagery with prose. They use film and social networking sites as ways to further experiment with their work and with their development. The ePortfolio, and student work showcased therein, has limitless possibilities for revision, for invention, and for imagination. In class, we discuss their public writing, designing activities and exercises to address the questions around crafting public writing.

ePortfolios offer the most recent iteration of a basic writing pedagogy that seeks to claim space for basic writers' voices within the cacophony of university classrooms, to address issues of audience and voice, to teach about the important role of revision in writing, and to tackle the questions of writing in a modern world, contextualizing and providing a laboratory for exploring writing in the world of Web 2.0 and its varying manifestations of authorship.

Defining New Culture: Acculturation on Many Levels

In her article "Personal Genres, Public Voices," Jane Danielewicz asks, "How might we move students toward public voices?" We have found that using ePortfolios is one way to move students from their personal writing to public writing. As explained earlier, students in basic writing classes at LaGuardia are tentative and often timid in their approach to writing. They barely have a private voice, let alone a voice "that enters the ongoing conversation to change, amend, intervene, extend, disrupt, or influence it" (Danielewicz 425). For our students, it is the ePortfolio that provides a gateway to this type of public academic discourse.

Much of what we do with-at risk writers is help them acculturate to a larger college experience, preparing them for future successes. In the discussion that follows, all student names are pseudonyms. Student writing is used with permission and appears exactly as it was submitted. Liz's student, Maria, a graduate of an underperforming New York City High School, writes this of her initial performance in class:[1]

> When I first came to college, I was under the false assumption that it would be a more slightly difficult, but extremely similar high school experience. Little did I know about the extreme culture shock that was awaiting as I walked through the doors of LaGuardia Community College. Where I was once that perfect student that all the teachers knew and loved, I was now that student who was struggling to keep that reputation in college. That struggle began with my very first formal college paper. This paper challenged and successfully changed my entire perspective of that "mildly difficult" college life that I imagined I would have.
>
> This paper was about how something personal to you, something that you feel strong about could become in a sense political. When I first recieved the assignment, I assumed I would breeze by this paper and recieve an A just like in high school. As I recieved the first draft of my paper back, I didn't know what to do as a huge NP (which happened to be a very small NP in the corner of my paper), stared me in my face, making a mochary of the effort that I put forth to impress my english teacher. (NP means Not Passing). With my hurt ego, I took the remainder of the time before the final draft was due and feverishly worked to re-write the paper, even neglecting my

> other classes. In my mind, the hard work seemed to be to no prevail as I somberly handed in what I thought would be a F.

This paper captures the disconnect between high school and college life that many students experience. While this student expected easy As, she was surprised by being placed in a basic writing class and found herself struggling to meet the demands of that course. In this first reflective letter, she also begins to discover the importance of revising in a process-based approach to writing.

When writing reflective pieces for their ePortfolios, students often discuss how they want people to see and understand them. Of her experience with ePortfolio, Marisa's student Emma writes, "My wish is to make people know more about my personality and the way I'm seeing myself as a writer. Eng 099 class made me to write as a free motivated person. I had so much fun practicing my writing as well as having a hard time in my assignments." Emma, who had started the semester with extreme writing anxiety and who often failed to produce in-class essays because they taxed her so badly, eventually found motivation in writing for her ePortfolio. The knowledge that this document was going to be public was the catalyst for her to write. Another student, Analise, reports, "I feel my EPortfolio its appropriate for public view because I show improvement in all my areas. Also in my opinion I know I could have done a better job but I feel it's a well done project that is presentable." Analise recognizes and finds it necessary to defend what she sees as sub-standard work because she understands the public nature of this writing. Thus, the ePortfolio adds an element to the writing classroom that allows students to safely explore themselves as writers while they turn an eye to a public audience.

Developing their public voice goes further when students begin to provide links in their ePortfolios to the blogs they keep during the semester. The blogs are motivated by our pedagogical assumption that students need to understand their writing as something they are invested in. In the blogs, students write about topics that are important to them, and as contextualized for an audience, understanding that their writing is public. Both the ePortfolio and the blog are integrated into the course as part of our larger pedagogical methodology. Students' blogs are already accessible to their classmates, but by providing links to their blogs in their ePortfolios, they make them public to those in their academic community who might not otherwise have read them. Student ePortfolios are password protected. While they are available to faculty and classmates, the general public cannot see

them without a password; however, including the blog URL in the ePortfolio allows teachers and students other than the ones who were in the initial class with the student to access these very public blogs.

In one class that focused on environmental issues, students blogged about the connections they were noticing as popular TV shows focused on the environment. Marisa's student, Karissa, writes a brief analysis of Bravo TV's "Green Is Universal" campaign: "In this campaign many bravo tv's stars, who are Tim Gun, Lee Ann Wang from Top chef 1, and Jesse Brune from Work out, are sharing their experience and tips for keeping our nature being Green." She continues: "For me it is awesome and desirable that the people in the shows-actually they're competetors and kind of masters in their field, so what they do is powerful to persuade people who want to be like them—because it has corrected my thoughts of what I eat, how I wash the laudaries, and why I should work out." This analysis, while not rhetorically sophisticated (or grammatically correct) enables Karissa to share her understanding of this program with her professors, her peers, and strangers who may have surfed onto her blog because she profiles herself as "the Christian who doesn't ignore what is going on in the world." Karissa is beginning to develop a public voice, even as a basic writer. She is entering into the existing conversation about the environment and media, and she is intervening in this conversation. Perhaps, in her future classes, Karissa will attempt to disrupt or amend the conversations in which she is participating.

Our students regularly keep blogs on issues related to cyberspace and technology. A standard part of that assignment is asking students in each class to comment on the blogs of the students in another class. Each week, we ask students to choose an article from the online versions of *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, the *BBC*, or the *Guardian*. Students link to the article and then write brief reflections on why the piece interests them and relates to the themes of our class. In her ePortfolio, Serena, one of Liz's students, linked to her blog entry on hybrid cars as an example of how she was able to write an informal, persuasive piece on the question "Can technology make our lives better?" Her resolute answer, as a future computer and information systems major, was yes.

The ePortfolio also allows, in the development of that emerging academic voice, an opportunity to reflect on changes in a student's writing. Serena, who had been in the United States for less than a year, writes in her mid-term reflective letter:

> I never thought I would improve this much in my writing skill. When I first wrote my diagnostic essay it was very poor. It had red ink on most every sentence.[2] It was mess to look at. The problem I faced in my writing class was because of the way of teaching in this college is totally different from what I used to learn in my place. It's really hard for me to adjust the new changes going through my studies. So maybe this is the reason why I am always back in my studies. Going through my paper I found that my essays needed a totally new look. There were changes to be made in the introduction, body paragraph and in the conclusion. Since the introduction attracts the reader, I tried to make improvements in the introduction. If the intro is interesting, engaging and clear, it is sure that the reader will definitely go through your 400 word essay. The common mistake you marked on both of my essays was unclear thesis and how do the paragraphs relate to the main idea. In order to make my essay outstanding and engaging, the 1st thing I needed to do was understand what the essay was about and what it was asking? So when I revised the paper I jotted down my new ideas that came to my mind and rewrote the essay again. Later when I read the essay I found that this revision plan has really helped me.

By mid-term, Serena had moved beyond her initial disappointment at being placed in a basic writing class to fully engaging the course objectives, understanding and articulating how to improve her writing. She shares important cultural information about how different this class was for her than classes in her native Nepal and then recontextualizes her understanding of education in an American educational setting. She explains her understanding of what an essay should do, how it should connect to a reader, and how its structure allows the reader to better understand an argument. Moreover, she demonstrates an increasing awareness of the importance of revision in this process. "I needed to . . . understand what the essay was about and what it was asking," she writes. Isn't this the essential question that all writers should ask of themselves? Serena moves from focusing on errors that her teacher identifies to situating herself as an author and trying to crystallize what she wants to say.

Serena's ePortfolio provided readers with even greater access to personal and reflective information. In another course, she had written an "About Me" essay (one of the important features of a LaGuardia ePortfolio,

where students write their personal narrative) complete with pictures and a discussion of Nepal. Like other students, Serena wanted to teach her instructors and her classmates about her native country and her background, so she asked Liz to read and comment on her "About Me" essay. Here, Serena assumed a dominant role as she instructed us through her narrative. Understanding Serena's cultural background allowed Liz to construct their one-on-one conferences in a different way not with Serena's essays, but with the differences in educational expectations. Her ePortfolio led to many rich conversations about how culture shapes us and our expectations.

Serena's reflective essay demonstrates a clear understanding of the academic expectations of the course and the requirements for a passing essay. She marks her dominant writing challenge as learning to identify the main idea of her own essay, "the 1st thing I needed to do was understand what the essay was about and what it was asking." In her letter, she discusses the two essays she had selected to showcase. Her strategy was to choose essays that had significant structural and grammatical errors and to rewrite those essays, showing what she had learned. Moreover, in her letter, she comments on Liz's comments, showing where they helped her to improve and where she felt confident enough to follow her own ideas about the structure and content of the essay. In her conclusion to the letter, she writes, "I revised my essay again and again. I used to write essays at home and bring them to your office hours. My final revision for this essay was 750 words with full proofreading and not a single grammatical error."

At mid-term, this student was already writing essays that exceeded our first-year college level composition requirements (600 words). She understood the process of revision and how to make her essays stronger. She also demonstrates a clear understanding of our class discussions about the structure and content of effective essays. More importantly, she confidently recounts her choices and her process. Like other students in this class, she writes with the confidence that someone is reading her writing, and that makes it more important than an abstract academic exercise because she knows that her teacher, her classmates, and possibly eventually strangers might be reading her work.

Serena's ePortfolio is also a good example of how students work to use the digital possibilities of the ePortfolio. Each of her final drafts is illustrated. She selected images from the online photograph archive Morguefile and learned how to cite them. Images and digital representations of students form an important visual rhetoric in ePortfolios. She chose to use seventeen different thumbnail images of herself on her ePortfolio's welcome page,

displaying herself in several different versions of her everyday life: as a student in jeans and a sweatshirt, in her native Nepali dress, in a headscarf and "Western" clothing, sitting while studying, and standing on the Staten Island Ferry. These images, coupled with her "About Me" introductory essay, allow her to shape the ePortfolio as a powerful autobiographical narrative, coupling her academic and personal life. She suggests that her experiences and prior education have an important place in her educational autobiography and that her previous life is not disconnected from her current academic and career goals. For Serena, and many other LaGuardia students, the ability to demonstrate many different sides of their personalities and identities is a key way in which the ePortfolio encourages the emerging authorship of the at-risk writer.

In the course of 12 short weeks, the students whose work is quoted here began to transform their relationship to writing, emerging as confident writers with a new sense of how they can translate their authority onto the page. For us, this represents the possibility of ePortfolios in the classroom. Basic writers emerge with a new relationship to the written word, understanding how and why writing can help them in their academic journeys. Additionally, this emerging sense of self is a significant step in our students' educational careers. All too often, the power of the individual voice is negated in a preference for facts and statistics. Students who have yet to learn the power of their own voices are told not to use them. Yet the power of story, the power of narrative, the compelling details of personal experience have always been what captures the imagination. Without the power of personal voice, leaders like Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, or Gloria Steinem wouldn't have begun their revolutions. This is our expectation: we push students to believe that their voices matter and they start to see their voices matter in public presentations of their writing. ePortfolio makes this possible as they engage in very public notions of writing in the classroom and on the Web.

Possible Classrooms: ePortfolios' Impact on the Basic Writing Classroom

DigiRhet.org points to a new digital divide involving "problems specific to digital literacies and rhetorical abilities. We see a divide where students may download complex, multimodal documents but lack the training to understand how to construct similar documents. . . . The new, emergent digital divide we will negotiate as teachers will be between those with and

without access to the education and means to make use of multimodal civic rhetorics"(236). The ability to make meaning from these multimodal civic rhetorics, according to DigiRhet.org, will create a significant civic and social gulf. Without significant work in digital literacies, as outlined here, basic writers face double jeopardy. They will have the traditional markers and challenges of basic writers coupled with an inability to critically engage and produce in the digital medium. Just as literacy has always been linked to social, cultural, and economic power, so too does this new digital literacy mean access to our newest forms of cultural power. The digital divide is no longer about access to technology, but rather a more complex divide of those who have had the educational access, training, and critical engagement to use technology well as literate cyber-citizens. In our classrooms, we are aware that ePortfolios shape this kind of new writing instruction by engaging students in an awareness of digital literacies and the ways in which writing is both produced and owned traditionally and as we move forward into an increasingly digital world. Through ePortfolio and our use of other Web 2.0 technologies, our basic writing students, for whom writing has often been a means of punishment and restriction within the academic community, come to understand that writing can be a powerful means of social and cultural transformation. By using the ePortfolio as a platform for multimodal work in the basic writing course and for showcasing revision, we believe that we make visible the expectations of a digital culture and help our students to become proficient authors of a twenty-first century narrative.

Notes

1. All student work is used with permission and appears as the author submitted it. Although we have changed student names in this article, we have not edited student work for grammatical correctness or precision.

2. Although this does not make it into Serena's final draft of her reflective letter, we had several conversations about the fact that I [Liz] don't mark student papers in red ink. She was shocked when I asked her to pull out the paper. She literally didn't realize that the paper was marked in green. However, her reaction to seeing comments and marks on her paper was so overwhelming that she perceived the questions and comments on her paper as having been written in "red ink," a further testament to negative student perceptions of teacher authority.

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